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VI.—*On the Present Condition of the Question as to the Origin of Language.*

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IT is far from being my purpose in this paper to enter seriously into the discussion of the origin of language, in the way either of putting forward a theory of my own, or of controverting those which have been put forward by others. I do not wish to open at this time before the Association so vast and uncontrollable a subject. No theme in linguistic science is more often and more voluminously treated than this, and by scholars of every grade and tendency; nor any, it may be added, with less profitable result in proportion to the labor expended; the greater part of what is said and written upon it is mere windy talk, the assertion of subjective views which commend themselves to no mind save the one that produces them, and which are apt to be offered with a confidence, and defended with a tenacity, that are in inverse ratio to their acceptableness. This has given the whole question a bad reputation among sober-minded philologists—insomuch that, for example, the recently established French association of kindred object with our own (the Société de Linguistique) forbids by its fundamental law any introduction of the origin of language into its transactions and debates. The prohibition, however, has not worked unexceptionably well; for there is no similar society a larger part of whose members have rushed into print upon the subject before the general public; so that one may conjecture that if they had been permitted to fight the fight out more among themselves, the community outside would have been the gainer: and hence, we need not feel bound by their example.

The reason of this irreconcilable discordance and regrettable waste of activity appears to be that no common basis of discussion is yet established. The question of the origin of language is not one of facts, to be settled by direct evidence, like the question of relationship of a dialect, or of the

genesis of a form; it does not belong to comparative philology, but to linguistic philosophy, all whose fundamental doctrines are involved in its solution. And it will be readily settled (so far as it is capable of being settled at all) when the grand principles of linguistic philosophy are placed upon a firm basis, when it is no longer the case that even scholars of the highest rank are disagreed as to such points as the nature of language and its relations to the mind and to thought (the old dispute as to *φύσει* or *ἐξέτει*), and the relation of human expression to that of the lower animals.

My intention here, then, is merely to review briefly the present aspects of the discussion, and to endeavor to straiten its field a little, by directing attention to points that deserve to be regarded as settled, and pointing out directions in which further effort will be likely to lead soonest to valuable result.

And, in the first place, it may be premised that the question of the origin of language is a purely scientific question, and a legitimate one, and that its investigation is to be carried on by strictly scientific means and methods. There ought to be no need of putting forth this claim, still less of insisting upon it; yet, as things are, it requires to be made and urged. A scientific treatment implies that the known and recorded facts of human language, in combination with known and observable characteristics of human nature, be made the sole basis of the inquiry, and be examined with thoroughness and without prejudice, till they have been forced to yield the utmost result that they are capable of furnishing. This, on the one hand, excludes the admission as co-ordinate evidence of all opinion, by whomsoever and at whatsoever time expressed; of all statement, traditional or other, and on whatsoever authority reported. Nothing but harm and confusion can come from attempting to combine the hints of the Genesis, for example, with the deductions of science, in order to yield a joint conclusion; or from suffering the one to govern or regulate the other. The student of language should not ask whether the course of inference and deduction which he is pursuing is going to bring him to conclusions in accordance with views heretofore held by any, or not. His business is solely to see

what language itself has to say of its own origin, and how plainly and unequivocally; whether it gives him a solution of the problem that is certain and must be maintained against all attack, or only furnishes probabilities and limits the range of possible hypotheses. When the scientific work is done, then is the time for comparison with views derived from any other quarter, balancing their respective merit and claim to credence, abandoning the one for the other, or trying how they may be reconciled.

The scientific method requires, on the other hand, that no assumption of a different human nature from that which we see and know be made a factor in the inquiry — that no special faculty, or instinct, either in particular individuals, or races, or generations, be postulated, and charged with the beginnings of intelligent and intelligible utterance. To make such an assumption is equivalent to abandoning the scientific ground entirely, and is no better than the admission of a miraculous or superhuman agency. If human capacities as they actually are be found, in the last analysis, unequal to the task of producing the germs of a method of communication like ours, then that will be the scientific result of the investigation, and the field of conjecture will be thrown open to whoever may desire to enter it; but he is no scientific inquirer who uses such materials in his investigation itself.*

*I need hardly explain that I allude here to the assumption which F. M. Müller has made a part of his so-called "ding-dong theory" of the origin of language — his assumption of "an instinct, an instinct of the mind as irresistible as any other instinct," which, after it had given "to each conception, as it thrilled for the first time through the brain, a phonetic expression, became extinct when its purpose was fulfilled." It is, indeed, possible to put this doctrine in such a form as shall give it a scientific *status*. If the claim were made that a faculty and disposition to direct expression of thought and the production of "phonetic types" forms a part of universal human nature, and would show itself and work its legitimate results in every individual if its action were not anticipated by the learning from others of already formed and developed speech — that, indeed, would be worth discussing and testing by careful inductive processes, by examination of the facts of human history and the history of speech. But Müller, with his followers (if in this particular doctrine he has any followers), does not explain himself thus, or show any indications of meaning thus; in his view, that this faculty was "peculiar to man in his primitive state" "must be accepted as an ultimate fact"; no other reason is alleged than that "that faculty must have existed in man, because its effects continue to exist" — which is a palpable begging of the question, a

In the second place, if we would make our contributions to this discussion tell upon its result, we need to draw the line distinctly between the historical and the theoretical sides of the question — or, what is nearly the same thing, between what has already been done and what yet remains to do. Historical investigation takes us from the present condition of language a long way back toward the beginning, but it does not and never can take us the whole way. In the very nature of things, it cannot show us why the first speakers used this and that sign for this and that idea; and practically, it cannot show us that they did use this and that sign at all. There is no prospect that we shall ever be able to say “*these* are the very first utterances of speaking men; now let us see how they originated.” We come nearest to such a result, doubtless, in the Indo-European family; yet, even there, we can only assert the use of certain elements in certain senses before the break-up of the family into its independent branches; of the absolute primitiveness of any of these elements we have and can have no assurance. In most or all of the other families we cannot even go so far as this — whence the worthlessness of the attempted comparisons of roots between the different families. The grand conclusion, however, at which historical study has surely and incontrovertibly arrived, is that all the grammatical apparatus of languages is of secondary growth; that the endings of declension and conjugation, the prefixes and suffixes of derivation, were originally independent elements, words, which were first collocated with other words, and then entered into combination and were more or less thoroughly fused with the latter, losing their primitive form and meaning, and becoming mere signs of modification and relation; hence, that the historically traceable beginnings of speech were simple roots; not parts of speech, even, and still less forms. That these roots, moreover, signified external, sensible, physical acts and qualities; precisely what ones, we cannot yet tell, and shall perhaps never be able to tell; but this, in its bearing on the question of origin, is of no great consequence. All that there

taking for granted, without argument, that language *is* its effect and could have been the effect of nothing else: that is to say, it must have existed because it must have existed.

is left to explain, then, is, how such roots as these should have come into being and use. And this amounts to a wonderful simplification of the question of origin; did we not see that primitive speech was thus widely different from the developed discourse of historical epochs, we should give up our inquiries in despair, and acknowledge that only miraculous power could have been equal to the origination of language.

It would be unfair to claim that the accordance of students of language in this doctrine is absolute. There is here and there an ultra-conservative, who will believe only so far as he is forced by unequivocal testimony, and, while he confesses the later formative elements of speech to be wrought out of independent words, refuses to infer that the older are of the same character, preferring to hold that there was some mysterious and inscrutable difference between the ancient and modern tongues as regards their principle of growth: and we even meet occasionally with a man who has done good service and won repute in some department of philology, and who yet commits the anachronism of believing that endings and suffixes sprouted out of roots by an internal force. But these are men with whom it is vain to reason; they must be left to their idiosyncrasies, and not counted in as bearing a share in the progress of modern linguistic science. There are also, of course, many whose studies in language have not gone far enough to show them the logical necessity of the views we have described; but they, too, are to be reckoned as in the rear of the present movement. He who sets himself seriously to examine or to demonstrate the theory of roots as the historical germs of speech will be accounted as one who threshes straw; he who does not make that theory the basis of his farther inquiries into the origin of language must not expect even to obtain a hearing from scholars.

Upon this basis of historically determined fact whatever farther truths are raised must be won by processes of another sort. Strict induction from determinate items of knowledge is no longer applicable; its place is taken by inference from general views and theoretical conditions—these views and conditions being themselves, of course, not arbitrarily assumed,

but derived by inductive process from the known facts of language and human history. It is here, accordingly, that there begins to be wide discordance among even the best scholars and deepest reasoners; a discordance that is sometimes implicit and unacknowledged, sometimes clear and outspoken. And it is highly desirable that the efforts of those who would advance the science of language be brought to bear directly upon some of these points of discordance, whose settlement ought to be already within reach, and would be of decisive influence upon that of the ultimate question which we are considering.

Thus, what difference can reach deeper, or be of wider bearing, than that which prevails with reference to the nature of the relation between language and thought? One party contends, either impliedly or formally, that there is an actual identity between speech, on the one hand, and thought, mind, reason, on the other; that language is not only a sign of reason, but its very substance; that thought without expression is an impossibility; that the formation of an abstract idea depends entirely upon its name—and so on. This doctrine finds probably its extreme expression in the assertion that a deaf mute is destitute of reason, and does not become possessed of it until he learns a mode of expression from the reasonable beings about him. The other side maintains that language is only the assistant of reason and the instrument of thought; that reason is the indefeasible endowment of humanity, and thought the action of human minds; that they need, in order to their full development and proper working, an auxiliary like speech, and have proved able to provide themselves with it; that, even had men been deprived of voice, they would have made available some other instrumentality for the same purpose; that he whose want of hearing cuts him off from this particular mode of expression is still a man, with all the essential characteristics of humanity, which merely require to be developed and educated by a less usual and less convenient instrumentality; that, were a generation of infants to grow up untaught to speak, they would from the beginning be possessed of reason no less than ourselves, and that their reason would

at once begin a course of training analogous with that through which the human race has already passed, one of the essential steps in this course being the production and use of speech. When we come down to smaller details, the one side hold that the idea without the word is an impossibility, and that no conception can exist till there is provided a name for it; the other, that the idea or conception always precedes in time, and must precede, the name; that signs are made in order to be applied to ideas which the mind has formed and seeks to express; that the whole process of language-making, from the beginning of time, has been only a process of names-giving which has followed close upon the growth of knowledge and conscious thought, mastering and making manageable and communicable whatever bit of valuable mental wealth has been wrought out by experience.

Men who hold these two so diverse sets of opinions cannot be expected to agree with one another in their views of the origin of speech. And he who should address himself successfully to this one subject, should point out the errors and misapprehensions involved in the one or the other theory, or in both, in a convincing manner, so as to lead the way to a mutual understanding and agreement, would, in my opinion, render the very greatest service that can be rendered to the question of origin. Most of those who undertake the latter directly do not treat the other with fullness, or at all; they simply let their discordant views upon it appear, as if the matter were too plain and elementary to call for discussion; or they dispose of the opposing opinion with an absurd misrepresentation or unfair fling. Thus, nothing is more common than that those who hold the former of the two sets of opinions described above should make easy work of vanquishing their opponents by simply assuming the latter to maintain that men work out a whole series of new ideas, and then, by an afterthought, set themselves at work to devise and apply appellations for them; or, they attempt to confute the idea of the "conventionality" of spoken signs for thought by showing the laughable absurdity of a gathering or "convention" of speechless men, discussing and voting the adoption of spoken

designations—as if the term “conventional”, in any of its uses, ever implied any such convention! Indeed, so customary is this sort of unfairness, that I may truly say I have never seen the controversy conducted otherwise by the party referred to, or the opposing views squarely met and argued against, in the form in which their present supporters would put them.

Another point of first-rate importance, whose solution is to a great extent bound up in the result of the controversy which we just have been considering, is this: should the first impulse to speech have come from within, or from without? were words pushed out by a longing after expression, for the sake of the benefit and relief afforded thereby to the individual's own mind, or were they drawn forth by the desire to communicate, to make known to another what lay in the utterer's thought? were they framed as the means of expression pure and simple, or of communication? This also is a point which is apt either to be overlooked altogether by inquirers into the origin of language, or to be carelessly and insufficiently treated by them. Yet its decisive bearing upon the question is evident. Its settlement one way or the other involves a complete diversity in the essential character of the first utterances, the germs of after development. On the one hand, we should have to seek in these some internal and necessary tie between the conception and its sign, naturally inherent in the latter, and determining its assignment to its office. On the other, no such tie would be implied, any more than between idea and sign in the later stages of language, and the only adaptedness in the sign would be its adaptedness to be readily understood by the being to whom it was addressed. The first framers of speech would be regarded as standing toward one another in a position essentially the same with that of two persons of wholly different language who should meet at the present time and desire to hold communication together: all the resources of imitative expression would be laid under requisition by them—grimace, gesture, posture, imitative utterance, whether onomatopœic or exclamatory, symbolical utterance, so far as in this there was power of suggesting an intended meaning.

The process of mutual understanding would be a tentative one, every imagined expedient being tried, and adopted if it proved successful; and ere long a foundation would be laid which would admit of rapid and indefinite expansion. We must not overlook, of course, the great differences between this imagined case and that of the primitive language-makers: where two beings with developed powers of thought and expression, and with formed habits of speech, came together, their progress would be indefinitely greater, and the process would soon become one of learning one another's speech, and framing a common dialect out of the mixture of the two (doubtless with great preponderance of the one over the other); but where the two were before speechless, and that command of the mental powers and dexterity in wielding them which language gives had to be acquired step by step along with and by the production of language, the process would be laboriously slow, and generations instead of days or weeks would be needed to mark the stages of its advance. And yet, in both cases the initial steps would be parallel and essentially alike. That is to say, the recognition of communication as the primary and ultimate object of speech involves as its necessary consequence an acceptance of the "imitative" theory of the origin of speech;* nor, on the other hand, can this theory be established independently of such recognition; the two doctrines must stand or fall together. Into any detailed discussion of their truth, it is not the purpose of this paper to enter. I would only point out one or two difficult implications which seem to be made in the opposing view.

One of these is, that the solitary man would have the same inducement to produce a language as the member of a family or a society. If words are made because the individual feels or knows that the possession and use of such signs will help his consciousness to gain command of the processes of mental action, will render orderly and consecutive thought possible to him, will be to his reason what the tools he invents are to

* The theory, namely, which some have unauthorizedly divided into an onomatopœtic and an interjectional theory, but which in fact includes both these, and more beside. See Wedgwood's *Origin of Language*, and the writer's *Language and Study of Language*, eleventh lecture.

his hands, then the whole efficient force and its occasion of action are within the individual, and society adds only a means of perpetuating what he originates for his private benefit. And it needs to be inquired whether what we know of solitary human beings, or of those who by some special local deficiency are cut off from the usual avenues of communication with their fellows, and whether what we see of the relation of society to language during the recorded history of its growth and employment, are in accordance with this view.

Again, a questionable degree of forecast, of comprehension of what would make for his advantage in the development of his capacities, is thus attributed to primitive man. That human beings at even the lowest stage of existence are accessible to inducements founded in their social nature, no one will think of denying; but that they are capable of anticipative pleasure in the "projection of their thought outside of themselves," in setting it forth as an object of contemplation by themselves, is vastly more doubtful. Experience, and only experience, it would seem, is capable of making the individual realize the advantage and take pleasure in the exercise — if, indeed, the realization comes at all until a considerable degree of culture is reached, and if, in all the early stages of development, men do not, so far as they themselves know and are conscious, talk solely for the sake of intercourse with others. Thus it was with the history of writing, an art that stands only second to that of speaking in its bearing upon the culture of the individual and the advancement of the race; it was not devised as a means of culture and advancement, but as a means of communication merely; and all the advantages which it has in the former respect also have been attained unconsciously, without being anticipated or aimed at.* Thus it has been, too, with the invention of instruments. The instinct to devise and use such aids to his physical powers is not a whit less distinctively characteristic of man than the instinct of speech; but the earliest human beings did not sit down to satisfy that instinct by ex-

* The analogy in this respect between speaking and writing, an analogy pregnant with meaning and instruction, has been more fully set forth in the author's *Language and the Study of Language*, lecture twelfth.

exercising their inventive capacity; they provided for each special practical exigency that arose, by such means as were readiest at hand, and could best be made available; and so they have advanced from clubs and stones to power-looms, steam-engines, and telegraphs, as in language from the rudest signs of thought to such intricate and perfected instrumentalities as Sanskrit, Greek, and English. This is the usual and normal way in which the latent and unsuspected capacities of human nature are drawn out by the pressure of external circumstances and trained by experience; and if the history of language has been different, the burden of proving it so devolves upon those who hold the doctrine.

These are, if I am not mistaken, the most effective tests by which the work of every investigator of the origin of language may be tried. If he mingles authoritative statements, from whatever quarter, with his inductive reasonings, or fails to recognize the results of historical linguistics in the establishment of the initial radical stage of language, he is out of harmony with the whole present condition and spirit of linguistic science, and cannot expect to command the attention of scholars. If respecting the relation of language to thought, the order of genesis of the conception and its sign, and the nature of the primary impulse to utterance, he does not hold definite opinions and defend them by solid arguments, or if he passes lightly over these questions as of subordinate consequence, he will add little or nothing that is valuable to the enormous and constantly increasing mass of disquisition and discussion of the subject—and, in conclusion, it may be claimed that, if he takes the wrong side of these questions, he will never reach a sound and defensible theory. A theory, what we hold respecting the origin of language must always remain, since (as has been already pointed out) direct inductive reasoning cannot reach so far back in the history of language; but the elements of uncertainty in it may, with right views and a sound method, be reduced within very narrow limits.